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### Lift That Ladder, Tote That Hose: UM professor leads effort to improve firefighter test

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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Feb. 4, 1997

### **LIFT THAT LADDER, TOTE THAT HOSE: UM PROFESSOR LEADS EFFORTS TO IMPROVE FIREFIGHTER TEST**

**MISSOULA —**

No one has ever seen a firefighter on the job doing pull-ups, so why are pull-ups among the skills included on a pre-employment screening test for firefighters?

That's a question health and human performance Professor Kathleen Miller asked when she was called in a few years ago as a consultant on the test the Missoula Fire Department was using.

Since then she has led a statewide effort to design a pre-employment screening test for Montana's firefighters that accurately measures skills related to the job. The test will become part of basic screening procedures throughout the state by late summer 1997, Miller said.

"This could be an incredible service to all fire departments in the state and set a model for other states," she said. "We'll do the first mass statewide testing in August."

When Miller, whose expertise lies in measuring and evaluating physical activity, began work on the Missoula test, she said,

"It was absolutely abominable."

Federal law mandates that pre-employment tests be job-related. Missoula's test had firefighter wannabes jogging and doing pull-ups, chin-ups and the like when it should have tested applicants on hauling hose of a certain size, shouldering the hose up several flights of stairs, climbing an aerial ladder and dragging or carrying a dummy.

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Miller did a job analysis and survey of the tasks Missoula firefighters perform, looking at two main criteria: the importance of the task and the frequency with which it must be performed. She then helped build a new test.

Word of her expertise traveled fast, and soon she began to get calls from other departments in the state -- first Helena, then Bozeman and Great Falls. When the three cities decided they would like to give their tests at the same time, she worked up a single test for all three.

That brought Miller an invitation this past fall to a Montana fire chiefs' meeting to talk about designing a test for use statewide, a task she then supervised with help from a union representative and fire department representatives throughout the state.

The challenge of designing such a test, Miller said, was the fine-tuning necessary to reflect the range of tasks that would serve small and large towns equally well. She had to consider, for example, that firefighters in small towns may rarely need medical emergency skills but that those skills would be required on 80 percent of fire calls in cities like Missoula.

"I tried to find those things all departments have in common so that the test tests the basic important skills," she said. "And I wanted to make sure the test tests fairly the abilities you need to be a firefighter."

Passing the skills test, along with the standardized written test used nationwide, will place an applicant on a common roster of eligible firefighters subscribed to by the Billings, Bozeman, Great Falls and Helena fire departments -- members of the newly formed Montana Firefighters' Testing Consortium. Miller expects Missoula to join the consortium soon and hopes small towns will do likewise.



"What's important to me," she said, "is bringing in the little fire departments that can't afford to do their own testing."

Departments will pay a fee to join the consortium, Miller said. But she said fire departments would save money by joining, thereby avoiding the expense of providing testing equipment and space and paying wages for people to administer the test.

Miller is no novice at pre-employment screening tests. She helped the Missoula Police Department design a test 18 years ago. Like the one for firefighters, it led to a new statewide test.

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